



FITNESS FOR THE NON ATHLETE

September is a busy month for some of the most talented and competitive athletes. The best tennis players in the world battle at the U.S. Open. Major League Baseball enters the final month of the regular season, with the best teams fighting for a chance at the World Series. Football gets underway at the high school, college and professional levels.

These and other sporting events will inspire aspiring athletes who want to compete with the elite. They will practice more and train harder in order to be among the very few who reach the highest level of their sports. The inspiration will trickle down to those who aren't great but are athletic and fit enough to participate in competitive sports.

But what about the big majority – those of us who are not very competitive, are not very fit and are not very athletic? Should we be satisfied to sit on the sidelines – or sofa – watching? The answer is, "No." You don't have to be a great athlete – or even athletic at all – to gain the benefits of exercising and improving your fitness.

Among the possible benefits are improved emotional health, lower risk of serious ailments such as heart disease and osteoporosis, more self confidence, extended life span and more. You don't have to dedicate your life to training to make these gains. You only need to set aside a little time at least four or five days a week. Here are a few tips to help you make that happen:

- » **See the fitness benefits in things you enjoy.** It doesn't have to be an Olympic sport to qualify as good exercise. Just about anything that gets you moving or using muscles counts. Do you enjoy dancing? Half an hour of enthusiastic dancing is a good workout. If you enjoy strolling around the neighborhood or in the park, pick up the pace and burn more calories. In addition to bringing peace of mind, yoga can strengthen muscles. There are lots of activities that make you happy and also make you healthier.
- » **Use the buddy system.** Finding someone or a group of people to join you when you exercise can make it less dull and more enjoyable. You'll have a source of encouragement and emotional support if needed. And you're more likely to actually get out and do it if you've made a commitment to others.
- » **Make it a routine.** Put exercise on your schedule and stick to it. If you make exercise something you try to work in when you can, it's much too easy to simply say you don't have the time.
- » **Take every opportunity to work your body.** If you're only going up a couple of floors, use the stairs instead of the elevator. Leave the car behind whenever you can make a trip on foot or by bicycle. Refresh yourself at work by getting up from the desk and walking around for a few minutes. And speaking of being at your desk, look up isometric exercises and see how to increase your strength with a few minutes of muscle tightening, even when you're behind a desk.
- » **Use variety to keep exercise spicy and fresh.** If your routine involves rotating through several activities instead of sticking to just one, you're more likely to enjoy it and less likely to feel you're in a rut. As a bonus, this kind of "cross training" can be a more effective way of improving your total body fitness.

Start with a level of activity that feels comfortable and easy for you. As your fitness improves, you'll find you can do more. This kind of training won't get you into the NFL or the finals of the U.S. Open, but it is an avenue to a more enjoyable and healthier life. To most of us, that's a more precious prize than any Olympic gold medal.

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Are looking for ways to improve your fitness and health? Call your EAP!

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- » Nutrition and diet
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